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SUBJECT: CONNECTING THE EU TO ITS CITIZENS: MISSION
IMPOSSIBLE FOR COMMISSION VICE-PRESIDENT WALLSTROM?

SUMMARY

1. As the EU enters a "period of reflection" on its future, Commission Vice-President Margot Wallström, charged with communication strategy, will soon gain wider public exposure. She intends to press the Commission's case for the EU to draft a so-called "Plan D" - where D stands for dialogue, debate and democracy, built around the principles of listening, explaining and "going local." Wallström sees the Commission's role as that of an honest broker helping to create a cross-border "public space" for EU debate, using the internet and EU support for networking among media, exchange programs, and increased access to the EU bodies. Wallström's emphasis on process masks the real problem: the EU lacks a message that resonates with its citizenry. We doubt her efforts will yield significant results unless more attention is paid to crafting a convincing case about the EU's policies for an increasingly skeptical European populace. END SUMMARY.

"PLAN D" INSTEAD OF "PLAN B"

2. Following the EU leaders' decision at their June 2005 Summit to engage into a "period of reflection" on the situation created by the "No" votes in the French and Dutch referendums on the draft EU Constitutional Treaty, Commission Vice-President Margot Wallström, who holds responsibility for EU institutional relations and communications strategy, looks set to gain increased visibility in the months ahead. Whereas some campaigners for the "No" in France and the Netherlands nurtured vain hopes for a "plan B" that would have implied a renegotiation of the Treaty, Wallström will be pressing the Commission's case, first made by President Barroso, for the EU to draft and implement a "Plan D" -- where D stands for dialogue, debate and democracy.

3. In various statements over the past few weeks, Wallström began sketching a revamped EU communication policy that would be "responsive, bottom-up and attuned to its many different audiences." Addressing a Brussels conference, she argued that the Commission must "listen to the people, seriously and attentively." For that purpose, she advocates "more systematic use" by the Commission of opinion polls and citizens' panels to hear from specific groups in the EU Member States about their concerns. Wallström wants the EU "to speak in plain simple language, avoiding jargon," and will press the Commission to explain how its proposals "will actually affect people's daily lives." Traditional vehicles such as press releases, press conferences and booklets must be supplemented by "new ways" of communicating.

4. Not surprisingly, Wallström, who has been sharing details of her professional and personal life on her "blog," strongly believes in the internet as "the" channel for an all-out EU debate and for communicating on Europe (Note: every day, half a million people visit the Europa portal site of the EU). Wallström declared herself impressed to see "how many websites out there are dedicated to politics, and how well organized the anti-EU people are," noting: "For every pro-EU website there are 20 anti-EU ones." She suspects that the internet had a major influence on the result of the French and Dutch votes on the Constitutional Treaty (Note: exchanges among young voters in France suggest Wallström might have a point) and would like the EU to become more active in the "blogosphere."

EU-LEVEL POLITICAL PLAYING FIELD

15. Joining the chorus of EU leaders anxious to reconnect to their citizens, Wallström wants to promote "a truly European political culture." This could be achieved through better scrutiny of EU decisions by political parties at both European and national level. The Europe-wide political parties - such as the European People's Party (EPP, center right), the Party of European Socialists (PES) and the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE), which are essentially active through European Parliament political groups, should develop local bases. National parties are encouraged to develop cross-border cooperation. A European perspective should be brought into the debates of national parliaments. "Innovative steps" to create a cross-border "public arena" for debate at European level might include networking among broadcasters; translation facilities and venues for exchanging press articles; exchange programs for journalists; and making EU institutions more open and accessible.

16. Wallström sees the Commission playing the role of "facilitator," a "helper" providing support to Member States, the regions and "civil society" to implement this "Plan D" by avoiding the "top-down" approach. In the next few weeks and months, the Commission will be moving forward as follows:

--The Barroso team will soon adopt an internal Action Plan, listing reforms to be undertaken within the Commission "to create a modern, professional communication service" that would better use its human and financial resources as well as communication tools;

--Later in the year, the Commission will publish a White Paper, intended for all stakeholders involved in communicating on the EU, that will outline medium and longer-term initiatives to be taken in cooperation with the other EU bodies and partners. These would include further development of the Internet to improve consultation, support to citizens' organizations, and the organization of "alternative conferences in parallel" to top-level EU meetings.

THE HARD TASK OF SELLING THE EU -----

17. EU integration as decided "top-down" enjoyed popular support as long as its achievements -- peace and economic progress -- were seen as concrete and obvious to all. Today, however, new generations in the EU have no memory of WW II. Peace among member nations is taken for granted and the EU is no longer associated with it. Citizens therefore wonder, "what's in there" for them. The Commission is well aware -- thanks to the Eurobarometer surveys -- of the issues citizens want the EU to deal with: out of 18 proposed items in a recent survey, fighting unemployment, poverty and exclusion; maintaining peace and security; combating terrorism, organized crime and drug trafficking; and protecting the environment were clearly identified as the most important. Wallström maintains that, faced with the challenges of globalization, "democracy itself must be cross-border," or it may "lose its grip on the difficulties that too many people experience." To illustrate the point, she refers to "companies that play off their employees against each other," pollution, trade in human women and children for sex, or ethnic conflicts.

18. However, though these problems are clearly cross-border, with a European and global dimension, the EU and the Commission in devising and conducting their communication policy have to deal with a variety of Member States that have major differences as do the various interest and age groups within each country. In Wallström's words, "middle-aged women in rural Estonia do not share the same everyday concerns as young urban males in Athens or Lisbon. Teenage girls and boys don't read the Financial Times or watch conventional news programs on TV." Hence the need for EU communicators to depart from their "one size fits all" approach and to start addressing people in their own terms and through their specific channels, which are often limited to local television. To Brussels-based skeptics feeling this is a "mission impossible," Wallström replies this is a "mission irresistible." But how could the EU sell its policies by "going

local" in a Union of 25 countries, 455 million
n
citizens and 20 official languages (not to mention
the regional ones)? Bearing in mind that a major
French television channel does not even bother to
have a permanent correspondent in Brussels, how
could local channels and other specialized media
with limited audiences and readership be expected to
make the case for the EU?

COMMENT

[19](#). Pooling sovereignty and shared decision-making
are ideas that have not won the heart and minds of
EU citizens struggling with daily life. The "No"
votes in France and the Netherlands were a wake-up
call for the EU "elites." But Wallstrm's emphasis
on process masks the real problem: the EU lacks a
message that resonates with its citizenry. We doubt
Wallstrm's efforts will yield significant results
unless more attention is paid to crafting a
convincing case about the EU's policies for an
increasingly skeptical European populace.

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